

SOCIAL WORKERS: DOES CLASS MATTER?

by

Lana Lee Coldwell

B.S.W., University of British Columbia, 1985

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## Abstract

In the social work literature, class issues have been described within the context of persons who are currently poor and or poor working class. However, this literature is silent on class issues relating to the experience of poverty. This was particularly evident with regard to women who grew up in poor, working class homes and chose social work as a profession, which was my research interest.

This descriptive phenomenological study using a feminist epistemology explores the lived experience of five social workers who grew up in poor, working class homes. Descriptive information was generated through face to face audio taped interviews. All of the women held either a Masters or Bachelor of Social Work degree and worked and lived in northern British Columbia.

From the analysis of the descriptive data, six significant themes were identified: women social workers from poor, working class backgrounds learned how to fit into the middle class by being very good observers of behaviour; they felt a sense of alienation from family and friends because of their current class position; conversely, they still did not feel that they belonged to the middle class; they did not quite believe that they deserved what they have accomplished; they felt that they have had to work extra hard to achieve their current status; and they recognized at least one person as a significant role model who influenced their lives.

This study did not generalize to all social workers who grew up in poor, working class backgrounds. However, it did give voice to the experiences of the women in this study and may resonate for other women who have shared the experience of crossing class borders.

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## Dedication

This thesis is dedicated to my four children and my five grandchildren.

My children, you were the primary motivation for my gaining an education and moving into the middle class. I wanted to be a positive role model for you all.

My grandchildren, barring any unforeseen circumstances, will grow up in the middle class. I hope you will not forget your poor, working class heritage and treat everyone, regardless of class, race or gender, with respect and dignity.

## Chapter One

### Introduction

In the field of social work much has been written about poverty and class as it relates to people who are currently poor and working class. However, in my search of the literature, I was unable to find any research on class as it relates to women social workers that have grown up in the poor, working class and are currently professionals. In the literature the areas of race, class and gender are often mentioned simultaneously, but in reality the emphasis has been on race and gender rather than on class and gender. When gender and class were mentioned, it was either in the context of women who were currently experiencing the effects of living in poverty or it was discussed from a Marxist perspective, which relates class relationships to the means of production. My interest was on class as it relates to the experiences of women who grew up in poor working class environments and who were now social work professionals.

The whole topic of class in social work was very complex and in many ways unexplored with regard to women. Statistics on poverty, and even on women and poverty are plentiful. Social work is a profession where the majority of front line child protection workers are women and the clients who access child welfare services are also primarily women who come from poor, working class backgrounds. Yet, we know little about the lived experience of women who are poor, and even less about women social workers who have been poor. Therefore, this thesis explored the

experiences of women who have grown up in a poor working class environment and have chosen social work as a profession. This was accomplished by using a descriptive phenomenological methodology, with a feminist epistemological base.

### Impetus for Study

When I departed from front line social work and began teaching in the social services field, I realized that many of the women in the social services program came from a poor, working class background. This is when I realized that my own similar background contributed to the effectiveness of my communication with these working class women. I had a great deal of empathy for their struggles because I, too, grew up in a poor, rural, northern, working class environment. Like many of these women I entered College as a mature, single parent.

My own experience was that of growing up in a single parent household with my alcoholic father as the primary caregiver. We lived in a northern, rural town in a two room house with no running water or indoor plumbing. I did not feel comfortable inviting friends to our house because I was embarrassed by our living conditions. I left school at fifteen and had my first child at sixteen. By the time I was twenty-one I had four children. I married an alcoholic whom I left shortly after my youngest was born. When my youngest child was six I returned to College (as a single parent) to complete my grade twelve and then continued on to the University of British Columbia to complete a Bachelor of Social Work degree. I have had a lifetime of experience as a poor, working class woman. My own lived experiences of poverty,

as well as my professional experiences have been a strong motivation to explore the experiences of other women who are currently social workers and grew up in poor, working class homes.

I wanted to examine the impact that these earlier class experiences had on women who were now professional and living their definition of a middle class lifestyle. I started to discuss these experiences with other professional women social workers whom have had similar class experiences and began to realize that there were many commonalties. I recognized a need to record some of these women's experiences as there is a dearth of literature on the subject.

## Chapter Two

### Literature Review

To begin to better understand the experiences of women who grew up in poor working class environments and chose social work as a career, it is necessary to review the literature. According to Leedy (1992) the purpose of a literature review is to explore the "broad environment of similar research that has been done by others and show its relatedness to your research" (p.93). Tutty, Rothery and Grinnell, Jr. (1996) suggest that, for qualitative research, the literature review provides the researcher with a conceptual map which will help in developing a better understanding of their research topic. Therefore, in order to understand how this topic has been perceived by others, an extensive analysis of the literature must be conducted. Furthermore, the purpose of a research review in a qualitative study is to alert the researcher to the similarities and differences between what the literature says and what the data suggests.

I did not find any specific research studies that pertain to the experiences of women who have grown up in working class environments and have chosen social work as a profession. Isaac (1995) states that in academia "class inequalities are rendered invisible and middle class norms are maintained in the name of professionalism" (p.12). This lack of literature has led me to explore additional material relating to women's experiences, including: power relations, oppression, poverty, traditional women's jobs, social mobility and the implications of class as it relates to social work.

## Definition of Class

Throughout my search of the literature I have been unable to locate a comprehensive definition of class. The analysis of class involves a complex interweaving of contextual factors. Bishop (1994) contends that at the minimum, when defining class, we need to take into account several things, such as income, education, occupation, residence, values, language and the position a person has in the social hierarchy. Class lines tend to be very convoluted because there are few firmly recognizable ways in which most people can identify to which class they belong. It is not unusual for my students to identify as being middle class as long as there are poorer people with whom they compare themselves. Yet, when we identify who has access to power and resources in our society we begin to discern a different indication of a person's class position (Bishop, 1994).

Ehrenreich (1989) offers a definition of middle class. She says that most professionals and white-collared managers, "whose positions require at least a college degree, and increasingly also a graduate degree" (p.12) are included in this class. She goes on to state that the middle class can be defined by "economic and social status which is based on education, rather than on the ownership of capital or property" (p.12). Using this definition social workers can be viewed as middle class.

A study done by Grella (1990) on women who experienced downward mobility after a divorce found that these women defined class as a sense of lifestyle and consumption of homes, furniture, cars...emblems of intellectual interest, such as books, and symbols of middle-class security, such as living in a certain neighborhood (p.45).



Even though these women were living in poverty they still aspired to having all the material goods that they perceived as giving them a middle class standard of living. This shows a 'common-sense' approach to class which includes much more than having money.

Marx defined class in terms of one's relationship to the means of production in which the capitalist class owns the means of production and the working class sells their labour to the capitalists for wages (Andersen, 1988). Weber defined class in terms of one's access to social and economic resources using three interrelated concepts that included economic class, status, and power. While both of these definitions have merit, they are too narrow when we are looking at women's experience. They do not take into account the subordination which is based on gender, and race and which, according to Marx, are secondary to class oppression (Andersen, 1988).

In my research I explored the concept of 'class' as it related to the experiences of women who grew up in poor working class environments, who were social workers, and who worked primarily with poor women.

To summarize, class can include a diversity of factors, from the ability to consume material goods, levels of education and status, to the ownership of capitalist means of production.

### Analysis of Class

When analyzing the experiences of class, "even women who fit into the same sociological categories have many differences" (Childers, M. & Hooks, B., 1990, P.70). It is important to look not only at what women have in common but also at what makes

them different. An example of difference would be the experiences of a working class woman of color compared to those of a white working class woman. They share their working class backgrounds but some of their differences in experience may lie in their race, ethnicity and culture. While it was beyond the scope of this study, I acknowledge race and ethnicity as they relate to class and gender as important components of class.

Andersen (1988) looks at another dimension of class as it relates to women's lives. She states that class "influences the access different groups have to economic, social and political resources" (p.104). For example, poor, single parent women often do not have the resources (emotional support, food, rent, travel costs, baby-sitters etc.) to acquire a university education. Yet, without an education, their access to economic, social or political resources is very limited. There is also a big difference with regard to access for women living in remote rural areas compared with those living in urban centers.

According to Rothenberg (1992), there are contradictory messages given about class. She suggests that, on one hand, many of our government leaders would like us to believe that distinct classes do not exist in our capitalist society. On the other hand, we are led to believe that the poor and the working class are morally inferior or have simply made bad choices. This view places all the responsibility for poverty and oppression on the individual and on the decline in family values, which, according to Mullaly, (1993) does not consider "the impact that the larger social environment has on personal problems" (p.58). This larger social environment includes contextual factors such as poverty, racism, sexism, heterosexism and unemployment.

There is a myth in North America that maintains that we live in a classless

society, which, according to Langston (1992), keeps the working class and poor locked into positions of servitude by the creation of false hope. If people believe that they are totally responsible for their own poverty and oppression, they will also conclude that if they work hard enough they can change their status in society. Langston goes on to say that "the creation of hope through tokenism keeps a hierarchical structure in place and lays the blame for not succeeding on those who don't" (p.101).

According to McIntosh (1989), those people with privilege have a vested interest in maintaining the "myth that democratic choice is equally available to all" (p.12). For example, if the poor, working classes believe in the "rags to riches" ideology, they will continue to blame themselves for not being able to achieve wealth. They will not challenge, or attempt to change the class based systems which give privileges to the few who perpetuate and benefit from this system. In contrast, those who achieve success in the present order see themselves as 'good' and meritorious. These points of view alerted me to important themes that might emerge in my study of women who have been successful at class mobility.

From the analysis of the literature (Mullaly, 1993; Carniol, 1990; Langston, 1992; & Valadez, 1996), it appears that class experience is socially constructed. The privileged in our society (who also tend to be the economic or political leaders) often take a Darwinian approach to poverty and oppression, the survival of the fittest. If you shape a society that is made up of the 'haves' and the 'have nots', then the ruling class can dominate those less fortunate "through ideology, through the shaping of popular consent" (Carniol, 1990, p.19). This domination ensures that the oppressors have access to the better paying jobs,

preferential access to and preferential treatment from our social institutions ...they also serve as scapegoats during difficult times for the dominant group often being blamed for inflation, government deficits, recessions, social disruptions and so on (Mullaly, 1993, p.158).

In an attempt to equalize the power imbalance that exists between the classes, social workers purport to examine the structure of privilege, acknowledge it and address it. Mullaly (1993) suggests that social workers believe in "people having the right and the responsibility to participate in those decisions that affect their lives" (p.43), yet class analysis, and particularly, class-based experiences rarely appear in the social work literature. Therefore, without studies such as the one I conducted, social work in fact does not examine the power dynamics inherent in class or offer an understanding of the experience of poverty.

Connell (1972) suggests that "one inherits class position" (p.46). If you are born into a middle class family but struggle financially, you still have the privileges that are attached to middle class language, behaviours, educational background, family history etc. that you can fall back on. The working class usually does not have access to the same "cultural" privileges, not only because of a lack of money, status and power, but also because they have not shared the commonly held and valued experiences of middle class culture such as, etiquette, access to travel, and other outward trappings of 'success'.

Due to the stigma attached to being poor and working class, many people choose to deny their class background. Langston (1992) states that denying "class divisions functions to reinforce ruling class control and domination" (p.100). She goes

on to argue that class is all-encompassing; it influences our understanding of the world around us and where we fit in. For example, it determines who our friends are, what schools we attend, what education we attain, the restaurants we eat in, and so on.

"When we experience classism, it will be because of our lack of money (i.e., choices and power in society) and because of the way we talk, think, act, move..." (Langston, p.102). In this way class affects all aspects of our lives.

Along similar lines, Kennedy (1979), in her research on working class women in the United States, found that the majority of these women

attempted to hide their poverty, their lifestyles, and their employment, seeking instead to struggle toward at least the outward appearances of middle-class respectability (p.xiii)

which included how they dressed, the schools their children went to, etc. To be able to adequately address the issues of class and gender we need to recognize the impact class has had and continues to have on our lives. Lorde (1992) contends that when one does not acknowledge class differences, "we rob women of each other's energy and creative insight" (p.405). The above quote and others like it heightened my resolve to research how the dominant values that are inherent in our class-based society affected working class women who chose social work as a career. The lack of accessible information on the experiences of women who grew up in poor, working class environments and who are currently social workers led me to explore this issue.

It is important to recognize how the different feminist ideologies view class and privilege. However, as Childers and Hooks (1990) state, "the most articulated theories of feminism and the people ... who name those theories have been privileged white



women" (p.62). Much of the feminist literature has been written from a middle class perspective, therefore it is necessary to acknowledge that feminist ideologies may not fully address the issues inherent in working class women's lives.

Both Marxist and socialist feminist literature address women and class. In the Marxist feminist approach, inequities of class, race and gender form a basis of analysis; yet capitalism is still paramount. Marx and Engels contend that "private ownership of the means of production by relatively few persons, mostly male, institute a class system that forms the root cause of most inequality and misery in the world" (Elliott & Mandell, 1995, P.9). Industrialism and private ownership of property did not, in itself, create a class system. However, according to Connell (1972), the combination of the two did. He states that "private ownership ... and the greater efficiency of industry which drives (it) ... lead to the formation of a labour market, the central feature of a class society" (p.40). Carniol (1990) also addresses the connections between the structures of political and economic power and the unequal distribution of wealth and power which "create the social relations that dominate and confine our lives" (p. 20). However, Marxist feminists also add the category of gender to this analysis.

From a socialist, feminist perspective, capitalism and patriarchy are viewed "as interdependent and reciprocal systems that conjointly keep women in a secondary position" (Simon, 1988, p.65). Neither Marxist feminist nor socialist feminist theories adequately address the lived experiences of poor, working class women. The criticism of how white, middle and upper class feminists fail to recognize class and race runs through the literature. Poor, working class and visible minority women have always argued that feminism leaves out many of the issues that relate specifically to them

(Childers and Hooks, 1990). Some of these issues relate to the effects of poverty, racism, ageism, and heterosexism.

According to Lorde (1992), "as a tool of social control, women have been encouraged to recognize only one area of human difference as legitimate; those differences which exist between women and men" (p.406). As feminist women we need to further explore, identify and define what it means to be oppressed. Only then can we work on developing "new definitions of power and new patterns of relating across difference" (Lorde, 1992, p.407). Women's oppression is not only a gender issue; it is also an issue of class and race. As such, my study will offer only one facet of understanding of the complexity of women's oppression.

Feminist writers such as DeVault (1991) suggest that when discussing women and class, we need to consider who earns and controls the income; how unpaid work is valued; and, who owns property. These are key questions when attempting to define class and when trying to determine the position women have in the power hierarchy.

### Privilege and Power

According to Chater (1994), privilege, like power, is relational and is constantly shifting depending upon a person's race, class, sexual orientation and gender. Power is defined by Andersen (1997) as "the ability to influence others...exercising power means people have to be situated such that they can mobilize the resources needed to influence others" (p.283). Society does not offer people who are poor and working class the legitimate power to procure any influence. Dabrowski (1984) contends that the working class belong to a strata of society referred to in the literature as the "run of the mill" who are really forgotten and 'nobody special' in the power system (p.67). At the

very least, women experience the intersection of the two axes of power - class and gender.

Class structures do not exist only as a structure of power, but as Connell (1972) states it is a "structure of rights - legitimate claims to benefits" (pp. 55,56). Those with the legitimate power (wealth, prestige and status), on the whole, do not consider this privilege as anything but their right. This value of a claim to privilege and rights is a part of the socialization that starts in the home and then is perpetuated by various institutions. For example, the literature, (Connell, 1972; Canadian federation of teachers, (CFT) 1992; Carniol, 1990; & Valadez, 1996), suggests that children who grow up in middle and upper class homes are treated with more respect and are given more attention by educators than are poor, working class children. Oakes (1985) contends that the schools are structured to legitimize class inequality. She states that all of the students are learning "attitudes that are regarded as necessary for the maintenance of a hierarchical and authoritarian society" (p.144). This indicates that social class inequalities are nurtured by the school system.

The schools, according to Valadez (1996), do not provide the opportunity for "lower socio-economic groups to achieve social mobility" (p.391). This mobility refers to the ability to move from a poor, working class environment to the middle or upper classes with a degree of comfort. Valadez suggests that there are many cultural differences that exist between the classes such as how children incorporate meaning to the events in their lives, their modes of thinking, and "behaviours that are assigned a certain social value and status" (p.393). Students who display characteristics that are outside of the dominant white, middle-class are culturally disadvantaged. My research



may elucidate and/or demonstrate components of this cultural, class bias.

Theories of dominance and power contend that women are controlled within a patriarchal ideology and are economically disadvantaged. Patriarchy may be defined as "institutionalized power relationships that give men power over women" (Andersen, 1997, p.385). This power is upheld by the majority of our institutions. The church, the military, the government, and the judiciary system are examples of institutions that continue to produce, reproduce and endorse this power imbalance. For example, the Roman Catholic Church continues to exclude women from the priesthood (which is a position of power), and continually tells women how they should control their bodies (which is very patriarchal considering the majority of active parishioners are women).

DeVault (1991) argues that women are drawn into participating in their inequality. She incorporates Smith's work which suggests that social activities are organized and constructed to have women participate "in social relations that produce their subordination" (p.13). This is done through the process of social organization. Women's traditional roles as wives and mothers have been perpetuated by both men and women and subsequently they have little power or control in society.

Working class women are beginning to recognize and speak out about the unfairness of male power in the family. Hartmann (1981) gives us an example of one working class woman whose frustrations can be seen in the following quote:

food, housing, medical and clothing expenses 'her' (sic) personal spending money. Many wives just 'steal' food from their own wages! The sum of it all is a lifetime of ridicule, humiliation, degradation, utter denial of dignity and self-respect for women ...at the hand of husband-father

(p.388).

Many accounts in the literature of the experiences of poor and working class women suggest that this particular woman's experience is typical of many women's lives. We only need to look at the statistics on violence against women to see the results of these experiences. However, it is not these types of experiences I am interested in exploring in this research; rather I wish to explore women's class experiences of which violence and subservience may be a part.

When looking at women's oppression, it is necessary to explore the macro-issues that contribute to this oppression. Connell (1990) contends that the "state" (major institutions of government) plays a significant part in women's oppression, although this role tends to be indirect and covert. Connell further alleges that the state, which regulates the systems in our society, perpetuates the oppression of women in such a way that it "can appear in itself to be gender neutral" (p. 515) which ascribes to its legitimacy. According to Connell, some of the ways that this is done are by regulating property rights, family laws, welfare, the distribution of wealth, and the laws around violence and harassment. The current political agenda is to "liberate the entrepreneurs and redistribute wealth to the producers" (p.512). For my research this alerts me to the interconnections between the political and economic ideology and the realities of working class women's experiences.

The income assistance system is a good example of how the state has taken on the patriarchal role of providing for the poor in our society. The state imposes restrictions on those collecting 'welfare' and can cut their benefits at any time. DeVault (1991) compares such welfare systems to a "supersexist marriage" (p.185) in which the

system "controls your money. He tells you what to buy and what not to buy, where to buy it, and how much things cost. If things really cost more than what he says they do, it's too bad for you" (p.183).

Many of the clients who access social services are poor and working class women. For example, Swift (1995) states that the "lowest in the power hierarchy, though often the highest in visibility" (p.494) are women caught in the child welfare system. These women are very vulnerable within this patriarchal system.

Social work is a profession and a discipline that has as its mandate to induce both individual and social change (Morrell, 1987 & Mullaly, 1993). The value inherent in this mandate is the intrinsic worth of every person who is "entitled to equal civil, political, social, and economic rights, responsibilities and treatment" (Mullaly, p.36). Based on social work values, the role of the social worker within this system is to try and equalize the power imbalance as well as to work at making the system less hierarchical and patriarchal in nature.

Ideally, having an awareness of privilege and power provides social workers with a framework for understanding the politics regarding the marginalization of women - in particular women who come from poor, working class backgrounds. It is for this reason that I will study social workers who have grown up in poor, working class homes.

### Poverty

Historically, poverty has been another way women have experienced oppression. The phrase "feminization of poverty" (Ward, 1996, p. 222) has brought recognition to the economic plight of women. Defining poverty in absolute terms is difficult. For example, Daly (1989) suggests that to define poverty only in terms of

meeting the basic survival needs does not take into account the social, emotional, political and cultural needs people have. For the purpose of this paper the broad definition of poverty will be used which incorporates the above.

Abramovitz (1991) cautions us not to blame poverty on gender because we could lose sight of the "role of the economic decisions made by business and government such as low wages, plant closings, and low minimum wage" (p.380). These economic decisions affect one's class position and indicates that poverty is both a class and a gender issue. Abramovitz goes on to state that the negative stereotypes surrounding poor women "not only stigmatize women, but also fuel support for punitive social policies" (p.382) such as 'workfare' (a policy of working for welfare). In my experience as a social worker, most women, when given a genuine opportunity to go to work or be trained for a job, will respond willingly and with enthusiasm. Workfare, according to Pollak (1994), does not provide people with jobs that pay a living wage, and it has not taken into account the need for affordable and accessible child care. Pollak (1994) states that workfare also "lets businesses off the hook and keeps wages low across the board, especially for women - the majority of minimum wage earners" (p.65), therefore, keeping existing power relations intact. This is seen as another oppressive policy, by government and business, that affects working class women.

Women who live in poverty have experiences and issues that are radically different than those experienced by other women. These issues often do not get addressed in the current political climate. In Canada, in 1990, according to Cassidy, Lord, and Mandel (1995), "women constitute 59 percent of the Canadian adults who are poor" (p.56). Their impoverishment is a direct result of their position as women. Cassidy

et al contend that a "sex-segregated occupational sphere continues to exist in which women are channeled into 'pink collar ghettos' with lower wages, less prestige and less opportunity for advancement" (p.56). She estimates that women earn about 65 percent of male wages. They are less likely to be protected by unions and they are often working in part-time, casual positions.

When we address the issue of class it is important to identify the underlying values in our capitalist society. In Canada it has been said that we have a dual welfare system: the rich collect welfare in the form of tax deductions and tax deferrals and the poor or working class through welfare or underemployment (Pulkingham & Ternowetsky, 1996). The only difference according to Langston (1992) "is the stigma and humiliation connected to welfare for the poor, as compared to welfare for the rich, which is called "incentives" (p.104).

Poverty and its effects can be seen in the elementary and high school system. The Canadian Federation of Teachers (1992) (CTF), states that "middle and upper-class families can provide their children with stimulating and enriching activities...which poor families simply cannot afford" (p.11). Campaign 2000 (1996) states that "being poor means a child may miss out on birthday parties, warm clothing, treats, school trips, playing hockey" (p.12). These are activities and rights that are taken for granted by other children. The CFT goes on to quote Richer who argues "that there is an unequal distribution of the cultural trappings necessary for success, with low-income persons possessing less than those with higher incomes" (p.12). This unequal distribution equates to a middle and upper class advantage that is dependent upon not only having an education, but also possession of socially acceptable manners,

cultural experiences, sporting opportunities and so on. The values associated with privilege and oppression that are based on class start in childhood and become the foundation of adulthood.

The literature on poverty shows us the hardships experienced by the poor and working class and the discrepancies between how we view people on 'welfare' and those with less education. The literature does not address the experiences of women who grew up in poor working class environments and have managed to extricate themselves from this life. For the purpose of my research this alerts me to the need to open a dialogue with these women in an attempt to explore their experiences.

#### The Implication of Social Work and Class

The social work literature purports to address the issues of race, gender and class, but in reality most of the literature gives minimal attention to class. When social work literature looks at issues of class structures it primarily focuses on poor clients who access the social services system. In my search I have been unable to locate any literature that addresses the experiences of women social workers who grew up in poor, working class homes. I did not find any references regarding the experiences of women who are no longer experiencing a poor, working class life style. I ponder the question of how this lack of available knowledge impacts social workers who want to understand the poor, working class people with whom they come in contact.

In the social work field, according to Swift (1995), "a hierarchy of caregiving, based on class and race, has developed" (p.498). Because according to Langston (1992) being poor and working class equates with inequality there are significant implications for social work practice. The implications may become more clear after



hearing the voices of the women in the study.

Historically, the field of social work had a value base that was dictated by middle and upper class values. It was condoned as an acceptable alternative to homemaking for middle and upper class women (Baines, Evan, & Neysmith, 1991). We may want to ask where the poor and working class women were in the social work profession? Why were they not going into social work? In fact, the answer may be that the majority of these women from those classes had to work inside and outside of the home to make ends meet and may not have had access to the requisite education. Historically, poor and working class women have always worked - as nannies or housekeepers for the middle and upper classes; they have taken in laundry and have worked in the market place (Schechter, 1998). In fact, they were highly represented among those who would require the help of social workers, rather than being social workers themselves.

Social work has always professed to be based on equality. According to Mullaly (1993) the manifestation of this concept by social workers depends upon their political ideology. He draws on Gil's work to explain the difference between political ideologies; Gil states that social workers who come from a humanistic perspective believe that all individuals "should be entitled to equal social, economic, civil and political rights..." (p. 39). Yet we operate in a larger context which adheres to the perspective of economic individualism in which people are perceived as "independent, gratification-maximizing individuals with no social responsibility for others" (p.39). There is often conflict for social workers who attempt to reconcile the beliefs of the larger society and those of the social work profession. In reality, many social workers resolve this tension by ignoring contextual factors like gender and race, and focus primarily on 'fixing' individuals rather

than focusing on the structural inequalities (Mullaly, 1993).

According to Shellhase (1986) "Women possess strong nurturing impulses, a great capacity for intimacy, and an ability to empathize... " (p.3). These are also attributes that many social workers have. She further suggests that "caring about others, and caring for others, stems from a feminist orientation" (1986, p.3). Not only is a feminist perspective based on these strengths, but so is much of social work.

Historically, social work became a "profession built around the goal of enforcing women's traditional role in the domestic sphere" (Swift, 1995, p.488). However, in the 1970s, according to David Austin (1988), a change took place which was motivated by women who realized that they needed to be financially independent "either as single individuals, as co-equal marriage partners or as single parents" (p.55). It is implied that it was during this era that some women from working class backgrounds entered the field of social work. Even though the literature does not specifically identify when working class women accessed the social work field, it is my contention that this likely occurred in the 1970s. It was at this time in history that women started moving beyond traditional boundaries and began to pursue careers in which they could support themselves and their children.

### Women as Caregivers

Hanmer and Statham (1989) have identified one of the ways in which society has used to legitimize women as the caretakers of others, namely "correspondence between the skill and abilities of carers and characteristics" (p.85). Freedberg (1993) corroborates Shellhase's statements when she says "long seen as a natural attribute of women, caring is associated with social work as a profession as well as with society's



conception of the mothering, nurturing role. There are two kinds of caring: nurturing and social work caring" (p.539). Silver (1988) states that the traditional fields of nursing, teaching and social work have never fallen below a 60 percent female labour force. Callahan (1993) suggests that approximately 70 per cent of child welfare workers are women and Kadushin (1976) states social work is one of the few professions in which the majority of the work force is female" (p.440). This means that studying women social workers may give us important insights into gender and class issues.

In summary, the literature on power and privilege, oppression, social mobility, poverty, traditional women's jobs, and the implications of class as it relates to social work provide a foundation for my study. This research will explore the experiences of poor, working class women who chose social work as a career.

## Chapter Three

### Methodology

#### Introduction

Choosing a methodology that reflected a sense of compatibility with my interest in feminism, social work and women was not an easy task. According to Kirby and McKenna (1989), "methodology, theory and ideology are intertwined. How you go about doing research is inextricably linked with how you see the world" (p.63). For this reason, I have chosen to approach the following research from a feminist perspective. Yegidis and Weinbach (1996) suggest that feminist research "relates to women's ways of knowing" (p.144); therefore I want to know from the women themselves what their experiences are.

Swignoski (1994) noticed the parallels between social work and feminism. Feminism and social work have as their basic tenet, the intrinsic worth and dignity of all people, as well as the goal of endeavoring to prevent and eliminate discrimination based on gender, class and race (BCASW code of ethics, 1984; Collins, 1986). Feminism in its broad context refers to the belief that "all dimensions of social relations are shaped by the structure of power relations between men and women" (Hudson, Ayensu, & Patocchi, Oadley & Matilde, 1994, p.55). Lather (1991) identifies the ideological goal of feminist research as a way of correcting "both the invisibility and distortion of female experience in ways relevant to ending women's unequal social position" (p. 71).

Feminist research recognizes that women are worth researching "as individuals and as people whose experience is interwoven with other women" (Reinharz, 1992, p.

241). As a feminist researcher my intention is to hear the voices of women and validate their experiences and their lives. Reinharz (1992) further suggests that feminist research utilizes a variety of research methods in an attempt to garner women's experiences.

I chose to do a qualitative study as I concur with Miles and Huberman (1994) when they suggest that words have a "concrete, vivid, meaningful flavour that often proves far more convincing to a reader - another researcher, a policy maker, a practitioner - than pages of summarized numbers" (p.1). Using a qualitative methodology gives more flexibility to the researcher and tends to be more "reflective of the everyday life of individuals, groups..."(p.6). To be able to make an informed choice, I had to have an understanding of several methodologies that were available to me. Two which I seriously considered were grounded theory (observes, interprets and develops theory), and narrative approaches (collecting and describing people's life stories) before deciding upon descriptive phenomenology.

I have chosen this particular methodology because it is "both a philosophical movement and a research method in which the main objective is to examine and describe phenomena as they are consciously experienced" (Beck, 1992 p.167). Further, Van Manen (1991) states that phenomenology "aims to come to a deeper understanding of the nature or meaning of our everyday experiences" (p.37). It takes into account the "sociocultural and the historical traditions which have given meaning to our ways of being in the world" (Van Manen, 1991, p.38). It is my intention to explore experiences in a way that communicates the complexities of women's lives without undue "interpretation". Yet, Van Manen (1990) goes on to say that the terms descriptive

and interpretive are employed interchangeably and that the "phenomenological text is descriptive in the sense that it names something... and it is interpretive in the sense that it mediates" (p.26). Spiegelberg (1982) in his discussion on descriptive phenomenology and hermeneutics (interpretive phenomenology) says that even descriptive phenomenology is concerned with meanings. In my opinion, using descriptive phenomenology with a feminist perspective as my research methodology, was the best method for me to garner this information in a way that honours women as well as being congruent to my value system.

### Descriptive Phenomenology

According to van Manen (1990), phenomenology is the study of the "life-world - the world as we immediately experience it pre-reflectively rather than as we conceptualize, categorize, or reflect on it" (p.9). In other words phenomenology looks at gaining a deeper insight into a person's experiences. Van Manen further suggests that one cannot reflect on the lived experiences while living through that experience. He states that "reflection on lived experience is always recollective; it is reflection that is already passed or lived through" (p.10). When van Manen (1991) explores the concept of phenomenology, he looks at the application of "logos", meaning "conversation, inquiry, questioning...to the phenomena of lived experience" (p.41). Even though each story is unique and reveals the contours of each person's life "phenomenological descriptions have a universal (intersubjective) character" (van Manen, 1991, p.52).

When examining women's lived experience using a phenomenological approach, I seek to explore their world of experience, which according to Osborne (1990) reclaims a part of people that has been neglected. I was most interested in the essential quality

of their experience, not the factual status of the events that occurred in their lives.

Van Manen (1982) specifies four characteristics of phenomenology. First, phenomenology is not an empirical science that is based on facts. It provides an opportunity to get in touch with the real world experience, to investigate the world as we live it and to look at the world as the individual experiences it. In my study, I interviewed five women, who are currently social workers, to explore their 'real world experiences' of growing up in poor working class homes.

Secondly, phenomenological research attempts to allow the "subject matter to be confronted, as much as possible, on its own terms" (Patton, 1990, p.408). This is done by the process of "bracketing" which allowed me to "peel away the layers of interpretation so the phenomena can be seen as they are, not as they are reflected through preconception" (Beck, 1992, p. 167). I used a journal to write down my biases, which came up both before and throughout the interview process.

The third characteristic as identified by van Manen is the ability to orient us to the phenomenon - being able to describe the phenomena. One must be able to describe the experience in such a way that it

constitutes the essence of something (and) is construed so that the structure of a lived experience is revealed to us in such a fashion that we are now able to grasp the nature and significance of this experience (van Manen, 1990. p.39).

My intention of exploring the poor working class backgrounds of women social workers was an attempt to understand the significance and meaning of this experience for these women.



The final characteristic is the formulation of the phenomenological question.

Gadamer (cited in van Manen (1980) states that we must always keep open the possibilities when we question a phenomenon. To question an experience we must continually go back to the things themselves until the essential nature of it is revealed. Van Manen (1990) states that we can not "simply raise a question and possibly drop it again, but rather that we 'live' this question, that we 'become' this question" (p.43). In examining the lived experiences of women who grew up in poor, working class environments, and who have chosen social work as a career, I have attempted to bring into focus those experiences in order to better understand them.

### Feminist Research

Phenomenology and feminist research share the skepticism of whether research can be value-free. Swignoski (1994) states that in "societies where power is organized hierarchically (by class, culture, gender), there is no possibility of an impartial, disinterested value-neutral perspective" (p. 388). What is important is to recognize that we are influenced by our values and when doing feminist, phenomenological research, to explicitly acknowledge those values. I attempted to minimize the influence my values would have on the research by using the technique called "bracketing". In this way I was constantly aware of my prejudices, theories and/or judgments, when analyzing the data. My self evaluation was accomplished by first identifying my own biases and then by the use of a journal which enabled me to reflect on areas of potential bias while conducting the research. Beck (1994) notes that a "considerable amount of self-knowledge is required for a researcher to identify and suspend personal bias in regards to phenomenon of study" (p.501).

According to Tomm (1989) the distinguishing feature of feminism "is the focus on gender related values which have tended to privilege males in both the society at large and in academic research" (p.1). Davis and Srinivasan (1995) suggest that feminist research "holds out a vision of the future that eliminates privilege, hierarchy and oppression" (p.348). Reinharz further suggests that (1992) feminist research is "grounded in two worlds - the world of the discipline, academy, or funder and the world of feminist scholarship" (p.30). Since traditional research has tended to reflect the values and concerns of those who are dominant in society (which historically has been white, middle and upper class men), it has, according to Campbell and Schram (1995), often ignored women and the issues that concern them. Feminist research values each woman's experience as representative of all women and recognizes and explores the variation between women (Worrell & Etaugh, 1994). Feminist research is best described by Reinharz (1992) who identifies seven key themes that I have attempted to integrate into my research methodology. First, my research is guided by feminist theory which attempts to "demonstrate the reach of the political into areas typically assumed to be personal, in addition to areas always thought of as political" (p.249). Class conflict and the politics around class with regard to women social workers are better able to be analyzed using a feminist perspective.

The second key theme, which was important to my study, is that feminist research attempts to create social change. For many feminist researchers there is an obligation "to contribute to social change through consciousness-raising of specific policy recommendations" (Reinharz, 1992, p.251). My research seeks to illuminate how our class backgrounds may impact us as social workers, and may raise awareness of

class based issues. More discussion and analysis may have to take place with regard to the impact of class on policy and practice issues.

Third, feminist research strives to represent diversity. The ideal research would include as diverse a group of women as possible within the parameters of the study. To this end I have included a varied group of participants within my research to meet this need for diversity and to enrich the content of the study.

The fourth concept is that feminist research often involves the researcher as a person (which is sometimes done as a postscript or preface) and explains her relationship to the subject matter at hand. I have included, in my introduction, an explanation of my interest in this subject.

The last theme described by Reinharz (1992) deals with the involvement of the reader. This is done through the use of specific quotations from the interviews which allows the participants to "speak for themselves or use their own voice" (p.267). I have used verbatim quotes in order to ensure that the reader gets a sense of the phenomenon experienced by the participants.

#### Interview and recruitment process

The five women interviewed for this research have either a Bachelor of Social Work (BSW) or a Master of Social Work degree (MSW) and are currently working in diverse practice areas within the field of social work. After speaking with several social workers about their class backgrounds and discussing with them the research I was endeavoring to do, five volunteered to be part of the study. They were all women who identified themselves as having grown up in a poor, working class family. All of these women were part of my personal and/or professional circle in northern British Columbia.



The five participants came from diverse backgrounds and ethno-cultural heritages. As noted previously, an important tenet as a feminist is to have as varied a group of participants in the study as possible. The feminist movement has been accused of silencing and marginalizing women who were not white and middle or upper class (Pierson, Cohen, Bourne, & Masters 1993). As mentioned earlier, the purpose of the study was to include as diverse a group of women, as I could accommodate within the parameters of the study. Cannon, Higginbotham and Leung (1991) have criticized much of the qualitative research that has been done on women because they say, "too often the emergent body of knowledge excludes women of color..." (p.107). The author's recommendation in correcting this imbalance is to include all dimensions of inequality within the research. In my attempt to comply with this recommendation I have included two women of First Nation's heritage, an Asian woman, and two Caucasian women. Four of the women identify themselves as heterosexual and one as a lesbian.

The phenomenological literature (Osborne, 1990) states that the number of participants can vary. Sometimes one person is sufficient to illuminate the phenomenon; however it is advised that more than one person be interviewed in order to achieve an in-depth understanding of the phenomena. I found that five participants was more than adequate in providing me with the information which reflected each person's unique experience because I began to hear themes repeatedly, an indication that saturation had been reached. More importantly similar themes emerged throughout all five of the participants' stories which gives the study a "universal (intersubjective) character" (Van Manen, 1991, p.52).

## Interviews

From a feminist perspective, interviewing is the antidote to years of researchers (primarily male) who ignored women's experiences. As Reinharz (1992) suggests, interviewing offers the researcher "access to people's ideas, thoughts and memories in their own words rather than in the words of the researcher" (p.19). In phenomenological research, according to Osborne (1990), "open-ended, minimally structured interviews are more likely to produce data which may otherwise be missed" (p.84). The interview, according to Bergum (1991), should be like having a conversation with another person. As in conversations the process is not one-sided or rehearsed, but interactive and spontaneous. This type of interviewing style was more congruent with my value system which is based on the tenet of equality and the belief in the importance of hearing women's voices, than with quantitative measures such as surveys or questionnaires which tend to be more impersonal.

The interviews I conducted were done in an informal setting in order to better facilitate the women telling their stories. Each interview began with a discussion of the purpose of the research. Each participant signed a consent form, which identified the purpose and use of the women's stories. (See Appendix 1) I discussed with the participants the ethical parameters of the research. A part of this discussion was the issue of confidentiality (where tapes were to be stored and the dissemination of the tapes after completion of the research) (See Appendix 1). The participants were informed that they could withdraw from the research at any time during the process.

The interview consisted of a few semi-structured questions in order to assist the interview process as required. The majority of questions, however, were unstructured

and flowed from the conversation about the participant's class experiences. My goal was to remain as close to the lived experience as possible, thus encouraging concrete, specific examples and events in order to explore the whole experience to the fullest (Van Manen, 1990). The unstructured nature of the interviews allows for themes to emerge and be explored more fully. As Hitchcock and Hughes (1989) note, semi-structured interviews are more flexible than structured interview questions and that unstructured interviews allow for a greater "degree of negotiation between the interviewer and the interviewee" (p.87).

Since all of the participants had identified that they grew up in a poor, working class environment, the interview began by asking the participants to define what this meant to them. The second question was concerned with how they became aware of their poor working class background. All of the participants were asked to explain what factors in their experiences facilitated or inhibited their being successful in their life. The primary goal of the interviews was to elicit the experiences of the women and in the process to ensure that their experiences were articulated in a sensitive and respectful manner.

The interviews were audio taped and transcribed. The transcriptions were analyzed for themes or what Bergum (1991) calls "thematic moments". These "moments" which are unique to each woman's experience are also found in all the women's stories.

All participants were offered an opportunity to obtain a copy of the research upon completion. In addition, each woman was asked to identify a support person whom they could access in case they had any residual emotional issues as a result of the

interview.

### Data Analysis

Colaizzi's (1978) phenomenological process of data analysis was used to describe the lived experience of the participants in the study. This method of data analysis is best described by Beck (1994). This analysis consists of five steps which I integrated into my data analysis.

First, according to Beck, one must read each of the transcripts to obtain a sense or feeling of what the participants were trying to say. I read each of the transcripts over several times in an attempt to fully familiarize myself with the participant's stories.

Second, one must extract significant statements from each of the transcripts. This was done by reading all five of the transcripts in order to get a sense of the common threads that were woven through each of the women's experiences. I went through each transcript using a highlight approach (van Manen, 1990), then wrote down each of these statements verbatim from the transcripts. In this way the interviews were broken down in order to make the analysis more manageable.

The third step in this process was to spell out the meaning of each statement. Once the significant statements were identified, I reviewed them again and studied them for what they revealed about the lived experience of the participants. This is an important step because as Colaizzi (1978) states, it is at this juncture that the phenomenological researcher is engaged in "something which cannot be precisely delineated, for here he (sic) is involved in that ineffable thing known as creative insight; he (sic) must leap from what his (sic) subjects say to what they mean" (p. 59).

Fourth, I organized the meanings into clusters of themes. To do this I continually

referred back to the transcripts in order to validate them. The fifth step was to integrate the results of the meanings into an exhaustive description of the experiences.

### Validity

The audio tapes were reviewed and then transcribed verbatim. The written transcriptions were summarized and reviewed again. In order to minimize any possible researcher bias verbatim quotes were used whenever possible. This allows the reader to form his/her own analysis of the material presented.

According to Osborne (1990) there are four ways in which validity is assured in phenomenological research: 1) by bracketing the phenomena; 2) by checking the accuracy of the data with the participants in the study; 3) by presenting the information in a coherent and convincing way; and 4) by assessing the extent by which the analysis "resonates with the experiences of other people, not in the study, who have experienced the phenomenon" (p. 88). I have attempted to utilize all four ways of ensuring validity.

After the transcripts were transcribed, the participants had an opportunity to review them to ensure the accuracy of the material and to minimize any errors. I have attempted to present the information in such a way that it is convincing to anyone who reads the analysis. Another very important ongoing process is to check with other people, outside of the research participants, who have experienced similar phenomena, to find out if the themes resonate with them. Several women, who grew up in poor, working class homes, and did not participate in the research have read the findings and all have said how much they could relate to the material.

According to Taylor and Bogden (1984) qualitative researchers do not put the



same emphasis on reliability as do researchers using a quantitative research design. Qualitative methodology is not concerned with replicating the information, but rather with giving a rich and clear description of the phenomenon. I have also presented my methodology and findings in detail, which ensures that any reader can follow it.

### Objectivity

When addressing objectivity in a phenomenological methodology the researcher must remain true to the object, or in this case the women's experience (van Manen, 1990). I have endeavored to provide the participants with an opportunity to describe his/her experiences and to share those experiences in a safe and respectful manner. Furthermore, I have attempted to describe in detail my logic of inquiry.

### Ethical Considerations

Each participant signed a consent form (see Appendix 1) prior to the interview. The participants were informed that the tapes would be transcribed verbatim and that the tapes and transcriptions would be stored in a locked cabinet in my home.

In the data analysis, verbatim quotes were used. Since confidentiality was important, every effort was taken to ensure that the participants remained anonymous, and so names were not used. Other identifying information was not used when quoting the participants.

Some of the questions and discussion may have brought up some emotional issues for the participants that needed to be dealt with. To address this potential distress, all of the participants were asked to identify someone with whom they could debrief with if they needed to.





## Chapter Four

### Class: Women's Experience

This chapter presents the analysis of the data. When analyzing the data, several themes emerged from the women's stories. I have used specific quotes to illustrate the emerging themes and to bring the women's voices into the analysis.

### Recognition of Experience

For three of the participants in the study, this was the first time that they had examined how their experiences growing up in a poor, working class environment had impacted them in their adult lives and in particular as social workers. For the others this was an opportunity to discuss class and gain a more in-depth understanding of some of the issues that they had been grappling with throughout the last few years. Class issues and the impact of class only surfaced for some of them when they returned to University to pursue graduate studies. One woman noted:

It was just interesting because I hadn't thought about that (the impact of class).

That those changes, you know, like it's interesting how you slip into the middle class and then so easily forget that, don't you?

This shows how easy it is to not explore or even recognize one's own class issues. These women know from experience how easy it is to assimilate into another class without even recognizing it. Furthermore, while some of the literature (Canadian Federation of Teachers, 1992) shows that class can have an enormous impact on people, many of these well-educated women had not reflected on class as a category of

oppression within social work. As one woman commented:

The topic is very interesting because I have never questioned my class background; it is something that is part of me that I guess I was convinced that it was too big for me to change. I sort of just have to accept that.

This quote is illustrative of comments made by other participants about the significance of the class background and how it is not often reflected on. Furthermore, the quote shows the juxtapositioning of poor, working class with something that needs to be changed, rather than understood, analyzed or even celebrated. One woman noted:

I didn't really look at the larger influences that contributed to why I was poor or why I am now considered middle class or professional.

Those larger influences are dictated by the way society identifies what role one is to play based on a person's position (class) in the power structure. It is interesting that this statement comes from a professional woman who has been educated to examine and analyze oppression and to understand the structural influences on the lives of clients. This heightened my interest in exploring her analysis of her previous poverty, and examining by what means she came to be middle class.

According to van Manen (1990), describing, explicating and interpreting the meanings from the experiences may "take the form of socially analyzing or deconstructing the text and thus exploding the meaning" (p.39). In the following chapter, I have attempted to construct the meanings of the phenomena into specific themes, which were common to all of the participants. Both of the previous quotes imply change which led me to inquire of all the participants what they had changed and why? The following explores what these changes were and how they construct their meanings with

regard to class.

### Observers of Behaviour

A major theme that emerged when analyzing the data was the way in which the participants had described being able to move between socio-economic classes. All the women interviewed were from poor, working class backgrounds and they all identified acquiring the ability to "fit" into the middle class (with varying degrees of comfort). Four of the five participants felt that they were now living a middle-class lifestyle. The other participant identified herself as still being working class despite a professional academic degree.

As previously described, moving from one socio-economic class to another is tantamount to ascending into a new culture. For example, Langston (1992) states class is "composed of ideas, behaviors, attitudes, values, and language; class is how you think, feel, act, look, dress, talk, move, walk';..."(p. 100). Depending upon the class from which you originate, the dominant (i.e. middle class) social norms are very different from those experienced by the working class participants in my study. When asked about how these women learned the norms, biases and expectations of the middle-class, they all mentioned that they had become very proficient at observing how middle class people lived and behaved in social settings. One remarked that:

watching and learning has been very much a way and still is for me when  
I'm out and not sure what to do.

This shows a common pattern of not finding the 'right' ways to behave within one's own background, childhood or family training, but looking to middle class people for knowledge of the correct ways to behave.

## Socializing

Among the differing norms that were experienced by the participants and which had to be learned in order to fit in were: the kinds of food middle and upper class people ate in contrast to the working class; the use of more than two pieces of cutlery at dinner (previously known as supper); the formality of other people's homes; the acceptable conversations one had when at social gathering; and the different language used by the middle-class. For one of the participants an invitation to a middle class professional friend's home for dinner was very stressful. She said that she would likely have turned such an invitation down because her perception was that the middle class ate and lived with a degree of formality whereas in her home they were:

very informal in our house everything that we have, just even the way we eat like I never use to worry about like what utensils to use. That was a big difference in terms of that (it) showed whether or not you were comfortable eating out in a formal setting or whether you were really casual and stuff like that.

This quote encapsulated for me what an immense and stressful task it was to try and learn only one of the many social norms that are expected when moving into the middle class.

This discomfort and subsequent learning by observation is demonstrated by a different participant when she said that she "always felt like a hick...I didn't know how to do anything. So none of my experiences were valid anymore." She expresses her feelings about being poor working class in negative terms - 'hick'. Neither this woman, nor other participants reflected on why such learning and adaptation was necessary

when entering the middle class. For most of them the feelings of inadequacy were also painful. This may be a clue to why the participants had not reflected on their class backgrounds; they had come to view them as not having any value, and certainly their previous experiences were not valued in the current milieu. When asked how one woman learned to fit in she replied:

I put a lot of energy into it...I observed everyone around me and I observed everything they were doing. And it was every-where.

In learning how to "fit in" one had to be ever vigilant because the two classes were so different. Such class differences were found in all facets of these women's lives. The following quote expresses these differences:

You know, the way people dressed was different. The way people ate was different. Their experience with food was different. How they used their cutlery at the dinner table or in the cafeteria, like, there was never anything that I didn't see (that was the same as her upbringing)

The above quote also portrays the amount of energy that was expended in trying to figure out what the middle class did that was different (but assumed to be correct) without having an understanding of what defines class. These women had nothing to measure it against; they often had no words to define the differences; they just knew what the middle class did was deemed to be 'better' than what they did. Consequently they had to work extra hard to 'fit' into that class. Not only was a great deal of energy expended trying to be like the middle class but, as the above excerpts illustrate, they experienced a great deal of stress trying to figure out the differences and then trying to 'fit' in.

Feeling a lack of being connected in relation to the middle class world was very common. These women felt that their lived experience was less valuable than those of their middle class friends. While the participants did not recall this being explicitly stated by anyone, the underlying message that was conveyed was that poor, working class experiences were worthless. Another participant says she learned what was considered meaningful, which was reflected in middle class norms, hence what one should strive to be like as an adult:

By watching, watching, watching. I was like a little kid learning, learning, learning I had a camera on all of this; oh this is valuable, okay I value this, this is more valuable than the way I thought, this is more valuable than the way I lived, this is a more valuable book to read, this is a much more valuable way to think.

Again, because these women found the models to emulate outside of themselves and their family, it shows how society perpetuates the status quo based on middle and upper class norms. The devaluing of poor, working class experience is very powerful; it functions to keep people in subordinate positions. At the very least, it keeps them undervaluing the problems of 'fitting' rather than analyzing the class structures in a more activist and political way. Connell (1972) and Anderson (1997) suggest class structures exist because those with wealth, prestige, and status can mobilize the resources needed to influence others. This influence is pervasive and contributes to poor, working class women's oppression. As one woman expressed:

I was influenced not to try to escape my place in society, which was reflected clearly within my family but also reiterated by others in society,



which then gave me different expectations of myself and much fewer possibilities. These were colored by the patriarchal, sexist, classist world.

As you can see by this quote there seems to be an invisible but strongly felt boundary with very definite expectations with regard to career, that one may be discouraged from crossing. The discomfort crossing this boundary may be partially due to the feeling of being an outsider in middle class settings. In turn, this meant becoming different, being removed, to some degree from family and friends and leaving behind their previous place in the world.

### Language

Language is one way we can distinguish which class a person comes from. The women talked about language as one way to keep people in a marginalized position.

One of them further explained that:

I try to keep it simple and to talk in really plain language to people. But I watch myself shift, like I change my language depending on who I am talking to.

This suggests that language barriers divide the classes and if one does not know how to speak the language of the dominant culture, there is definite marginalization. The quote also indicates the kind of vigilance one must have in order to use the 'right' language.

One woman felt like she had a real advantage when working with clients because she knew the language of both the working class and the middle class. She said:

I try to help them (clients) learn it (language) in a gentle way, in as safe an environment as I can so that when they go out there, they now advocate themselves, then they have language that will mean - because language

is power.

This quote illustrates if you want to be heard, you need to know and understand the language of the dominant, middle class. This language is not inherent to women of poor, working class backgrounds; it needs to be learned. This quote also illustrates how this worker wanted to empower her clients by teaching them how to negotiate the language barriers. These kinds of experiences also show not only distinct social norms between the working class and the middle class but they also show how these women have been successful at learning how to negotiate those class boundaries, even while not explicitly acknowledging their existence to themselves.

The participants in the study have experienced the inequitable distribution of wealth and power. In learning how to fit in they had to shift their behaviour to middle class norms. They recognized some of the invisible barriers of social relations and structures that kept them in a subordinate position in society. These women have learned how to make these walls more visible, in order to cross over into the middle class, by being vigilant observers of behaviors.

#### **Alienation, Distrust and Discomfort**

Social class mobility has helped the participants negotiate the terrain of different classes but it has also caused some grief and pain with regard to family and friends. Many of the participants identified that they felt that they were moving between two worlds. They spoke of their families who viewed them differently because they now had an education. Some distrust was displayed by family and friends with regard to the educational differences. As one woman remarked concerning her family's beliefs, "education is considered only for the richer peoples". Repeatedly, these women

expressed that they found it uncomfortable going back into the working class environment once it was perceived, by their families and friends, that they had left it for bigger and better things. For example, Taylor (1994) experienced this distrust after getting her education and returning to her home town in Newfoundland. She stated that "it took me years to feel that I belonged again, because people saw me as changing into someone who they were not sure they could trust. I was seen as an academic" (p.75). Being an academic is interpreted by many working class people as having moved into an advantaged position of which they are not a part. The women in my study experienced a degree of ostracism from their own families and friends because they had stepped out of what was seen as the norm in their 'culture'. One of the women recounted this experience with her family by stating:

In one way I was respected but in another way it was thought that I was better than them; I always had to convince them that I had this education but I'm still me.

This quote illustrates the oppression and barriers that these women felt came from not only middle and upper class people but from their working class family and friends as well.

### Education

In keeping with the theme of feeling different and apart from family, all of the women I interviewed said they were the only individuals in their biological families with a university degree. Three of the women were the only members of their extended families who went on to attain any post-secondary education. One participant stated that "university was never an expectation; it was considered an extra. It wasn't an

expectation because it was not available to everyone". This was common amongst the participants despite the rhetoric in our society about universal access to education. It is viewed by the poor, working class families of the women I interviewed as beyond what they could expect for themselves. The majority of their parents had a grade school education that was 'functional'; they learned what they needed to know in order to survive. Another participant expressed it this way "Having a university education was considered a privilege". One of the class barriers for poor, working class women social workers that needed to be surmounted in order to fit into the middle class was to obtain a post secondary education; this according to one participant "was a way to move away from part of the working poor". She expressed it this way:

"Education was seen as the conduit to having a privileged position in society". Another women said that: "school learning was a luxury...it meant you lived a more privileged life style." She equated that privileged life style with having: extra time to do things like read the newspaper and being involved in politics and other things that were more abstract, not part of the circle my family and parents experience.

The above noted privileges were luxuries because it was only people with education and privilege who had the time or interest to engage in these, often taken for granted, privileges of Canadian citizenship.

'Middle class' was touted as the ideal to which everyone should strive, as expressed by one participant. "The middle class was promoted as the normal family; the family to strive to be". Another woman expressed it this way:

We looked up to people of different classes. Like with people with money

or middle class people or upper middle class people...I mean it was really us thinking they were better than we were.

Once again this shows that being part of the middle or upper class was perceived as not only preferable, but was also seen as unattainable for most working class people.

Hence, the participants in this research were exceptional in that they had all attained at least one university degree.

Another women said that her family accused her of "selling out" because she chose to acquire some of the "things" from the middle-class. Some of those middle-class "things" were identified as:

owning your own home, having a car payment, using cloth or pretty paper napkins at meal times, listening to CBC radio, having enough money to buy new clothes, and the ability to buy whatever groceries you want.

These changes in material goods, culture and lifestyle amenities all contribute to widening the social and emotional gap between the working class and the middle class, even within members of the same family.

### Food

When we think of the differences between the poor, working class and the middle class we do not often consider that food can act as a barrier. For example, one of the participants stated that when she has her family, who are still working class, over for a meal, she has to be very cognizant of what food she offers them. She grew up eating foods such as miracle whip and canned cream; she now uses mayonnaise and creamo, which would be considered middle class fare by her working class family. In her words, her family would think that she is "putting on the dog" if she offered them creamo or

mayonnaise. While these may seem like minor barriers when considered among other oppressions; they are part of constructing invisible walls and enormous stresses for these working class women. It also shows the strain of having to be cognizant of both 'cultures'.

The acquisition of material goods and the procuring of a university degree seemed to be the criteria described by the women in my study to explain how working class families identified what middle class was. Yet, there seemed to be the assumption by these formerly poor, working class women that everyone should strive to be middle class, even though this privileged position appeared to build up barriers and alienate family and friends. The expectation to be middle class had not been discussed or articulated in concrete terms by their poor, working class families. However, the values of the middle class lifestyle seemed to permeate all aspects of their lives. These women have worked hard to bridge the subsequent gap that surfaced between them and their families when they did move into a middle class lifestyle.

All the participants in the study felt that they are currently living a middle class life style. When asked how living a middle-class lifestyle differed from their experience of living in a poor, working class environment they spoke of having enough money to buy basic necessities but also the "frills". One of the women spoke of having extended family over to dinner and unlike them she did not have to clip out all the grocery coupons and worry about

going out and buying a great big package of steaks. Well, if you had taken me back twenty years ago or more, it would have been like, trying to figure something out with hamburger... I mean, even down to driving



vehicles, it's down to buying clothes.

Having enough money to make ends meet and to be able to spend money on material goods was one way of defining the middle class life style.

Another way of defining middle class for these women was the ability to make choices; choices about "the neighborhood you want to live in; not just finding the cheapest rental or whatever". One of the women interviewed still considers herself to be working class. For example she stated:

I am a working-class person, I will be a working-class person until I die. It isn't something you can just throw off. But I have chosen to acquire some of the things from the middle class because I like them and I can; but it doesn't make me a different person.

This particular quote indicates that being working class is more than a state of mind. It is more than having money or material goods despite the perceptions people have. Other's described living a middle class lifestyle but also recognizing that their background and heritage is very important to them. They feel privileged that they can afford, to some extent, to choose what they want to take from the middle-class lifestyle and what they choose not to take. They like the fact that they can move, with some degree of ease, between the two cultures. They have traversed the unknown terrain and know its pitfalls and its advantages. As one woman says once she was able to "demystify" the middle class she felt a tremendous amount of power and subsequently could take pride in coming from working class roots.

This particular woman says she made a conscious choice to learn how to fit into middle class society and now feels very privileged that she has the ability to move

between both worlds.

### Continued Discomfort Fitting into the Middle Class

The expressed ease of being able to move freely between two classes was contradicted in other parts of the interviews with the women. All of the participants are currently living a middle class lifestyle (having enough money to live comfortably on, and having a university education) and are perceived by their colleagues and friends as middle class, they have some uneasiness with fitting into middle class culture. Two of the participants when discussing their feelings of discomfort in social settings said that they still felt that most social gatherings of the middle class were very superficial. This concept is illustrated in the following quote:

Lots of times I felt people were artificial and. I think how people talk, it didn't feel like it was sincere. I found when we were out in middle class functions people would just flit around from here to there and it would just be like la-de-da, like, there was never any content. It was always just surface and so I never knew how to relate to them. Still don't.

This quote suggests that this woman will never totally move beyond her background and fit into another culture that she did not grow up in. This theme was reiterated by the other participants. It also suggests that regardless of education and money there continues to be a separateness, and a sense of alienation. This may be as Oakes (1995) and Valadez, (1996) contend, that society is structured to ensure class distinctions.

### Feelings of not Deserving

Another related theme that wove its way through all but one of the women's experiences was the feeling of not deserving what they had attained for themselves.

When I asked the participants if there were any factors that inhibited their success, four of the five spoke about having feelings of not being entitled to the success that they had attained. They realized, on a cognitive level, that they had all worked hard to achieve a university education, their professional status, and their lifestyles, but as one participant states:

Some people believe that they have a right to certain things. When you grow up poor you don't believe you have that right. You are expected to live with what you have and not question that....It's not self-esteem it's the core; you know, your inner beliefs in your own capabilities and stuff.

These feelings are very complex. They illustrate how growing up poor, working class can have an immense impact on how this woman views herself in contrast to the world around her. This is congruent with my own experiences as well as other women whom I have spoken to who were not a part of the study. One professional woman, outside of the study, said that she is always afraid that someone will find out that she is a fraud because her middle class attributes are a facade, which covers up her working class beginnings.

Coming from poor, working class backgrounds is often synonymous with feeling devalued and feeling that you "don't deserve your status and your success, that there is always the feeling that you don't really belong". These feelings of insecurity frequently start when children go to school. The Canadian Teachers Federation (1992) speaks about low income children being at a distinct disadvantage when they enter the school system with regard to having lower aspirations and expectations. Children reflect the values of our society that promotes those with privilege to attain higher education, while

those who do not are viewed as individual failures rather than conforming to structural class norms.

Similarly, when the participants were asked when they realized that they were different because they were living in a poor, working class home, the majority of the women said it was when they went to school. As pre-school children, most of these women did not realize they lived differently from other children, because everyone in their neighborhoods were poor, working class. When they left the neighborhood to attend school, they realized that they dressed and ate differently, and that their families did not have the money that would enable them to participate in activities enjoyed by middle class children. For example, one woman said that she could not be included with a group of friends because she "didn't have the money to do things that they were doing and would always feel embarrassed" if her friends offered to buy her things. Another participant said she first realized the difference when, in school, the teacher would ask them to talk about their summer vacation, which she said:

was the strangest concept for me because we didn't have a vacation.

Summer wasn't any different than school time. When we didn't go to

school the kids were expected to work around the home.

In many poor, working class families everyone had to help in order to sustain the family. Vacations, which included going away for a holiday, were not affordable. Isaac (1995) states that all those experiences that the middle class experience as normal are "embedded in the dominant view of class....It is a way of keeping working class experience closeted and middle class experience dominant" (p.9).

The above quote illustrates for me how educators are often unaware of class

differences and tend not to be sensitive or cognizant of the different class issues that affect children. If the teacher him/her self is from a middle class background he/she may not even realize that other children do not have the same kind of experience or resources that they take for granted. For example, one of the participants said she could not participate in some sports activities at school or go to the out of town playoffs with her team because she could not afford the bus fare. She said that extra curricular activities "were considered a luxury; items that you didn't need to get by on a day to day basis".

What were considered luxury items by the poor, working class were in fact concrete deprivations of basic participation in our society. These deprivations resulted in insecurities that commenced in school and carried over into adulthood. Such experiences affected how the participants saw themselves in relation to the world around them. For example, one woman says that she was:

Always feeling that other people knew more than me. For example no matter how old I was always feeling that people around me, who were the same age, were older than me. I always felt younger; it wasn't about age it was about some kind of information or experience that they had that I didn't have privy to. It was about privilege and about feeling naive a lot of the time; about always feeling that I had more to learn around people who I later realized were not from working class backgrounds.

This very powerful quote illustrates how this woman still, as an adult, has felt disadvantaged because of growing up not having access to cultural knowledge and experiences which are considered the norm for middle class children. It also shows in a

powerful way how middle class experiences are perceived as the norm to which working class people have to conform or work to attain.

### Reading

Three of the participants spoke about how in their families, reading was either ignored or actively discouraged. For example, one woman said that: "The family I was brought up in books were considered a waste of time". This cogently shows how literature is considered beyond the experiences that a poor working class person should have. Another woman stated that:

(my family) they discouraged me from reading. They would say things like, 'you're eyes are going to fall out. I was the only person who read. 'You're eyes are going to fall out, you're going to go blind, you know', or 'are you reading again?' That kind of stuff.

The exposure to literature and different lifestyles was not readily available to these women as it was to many women of middle and upper class origins. It also speaks to the motivation and drive one must have to surmount the lack of support for reading and learning.

Another woman said that some of her insecurities about class came from not having read the "proper books":

It's about how many books you've read. I didn't read anything up to the time I graduated high school...I talked to other people who are the same age as me who went to school in cities and came from a different class; they read way more than I did. I never read the classics and I never read a whole pile of things. Most of the time I read books that really interest



me, right? And they are not the books they talk about in elite circles. So, that's real scary. I'm forty years old and haven't read the books and when I meet somebody who...has read everything...they appear to be intellectual to me. And so I find it intimidating.

This shows the value that the middle class appear to place on literature and how this woman feels oppressed because this is one more thing that she has not been able to achieve in her quest to fit into the middle class lifestyle. This also demonstrates that class is not just about money, and access to current privilege; it is also about the history that one brings to the present moment's experience.

#### Working Hard and Being Independent

Another common theme was that these women felt that they needed to work unusually hard to get to where they wanted to be, unlike their middle class counterparts. One woman said "I had to work extra hard to make up for that" (being poor). Her life history up to this point was an experience to be overcome, not one to be shared and valued. These women recognized very early in their childhood that nothing was going to be handed to them. If they wanted to have any extras (like education and other choices) they were wholly responsible for getting them. This translated into having to work hard to get what some of their friends took for granted:

There is always the expectation that I have to work for it (things I want), it's not just going to fall in my lap...some people that I know that have grown up in the middle class, like, were brought up in the middle class, the expectation was that they would have that (for example, access to education); money would be there. I never ever- I didn't have that

(expectation).

This quote illustrates what Valadez (1996) alludes to, that if the poor working class want an education they have more hurdles to jump through, than their middle class counterparts. Education in our society is mythologized as an equal right for all, where in fact access to education may not be available to everyone or is a much greater challenge to those from the poor, working class.

Another participant said:

If they (the middle class child) didn't live at home then their parents helped them out financially and it was just an expectation. Like everybody saves for their kid's education, don't they? Well, not in my experience.

This woman is expressing her frustration over the perception that education is a given if the child wants it. For the poor working class, attaining an education is very hard work, as one woman said "within my family but also reiterated within society which then gave me different expectations of myself and fewer possibilities". This indicates that this working class person has less of what the Canadian Federation of Teachers (1992) refers to as 'cultural capital' (which are the advantages that are needed for success) than does the person coming from a middle class family.

A sense of being very independent occurred because these women could only count on their own hard work and resourcefulness, not on their families helping them out financially. One woman described it this way: "coming from a poor background, it has made me very independent and it has made me want to be self sufficient". Some of this independence refers to financial security; having enough money to have choices and "to have the ability to earn a living, have the lifestyle; a comfortable lifestyle". Another

woman said that:

I always need to have a certain amount of money just there as a reserve...just having a reserve there so that I always knew that I had something. So, security is - yeah - big.

These women know what it is like to be poor and as one woman said "there is a thin insulation between you and God knows what". In contrast, having their own money and being self-sufficient is one way of illustrating their sense of "isolation" because there is no one else they can count on for financial help. Working class women have always worked hard in our society; these women have carried on this tradition of working hard. These women saw the struggles their parents went through to feed and house their children with little recognition or monetary reward for their hard work. As Swift (1995) recognized, working class women often had no choice but to work.

The experiences these women had in their childhood and within the educational system culminated in their fierce sense of independence. They all recognized the need to work hard in order to be self-sufficient.

### Class Background in Relation to Social Work

All of the participants chose social work as a career after they had worked in other areas. Prior to attaining a BSW or MSW, three of the women were licensed practical nurses; one a clerk typist; and one a youth care worker. Social work, as a career, was chosen for a variety of reasons; one of which was that they had a desire to help other people attain a better quality of life. One woman explained it in the following way:

I believe everybody deserves a better quality of life or a certain standard,

they really shouldn't have to struggle so hard to have opportunities

because they didn't have the resources or they didn't have the money.

Most of these women could relate to those who were less fortunate because they themselves had lived in homes with few resources and few opportunities. They were attempting to weave the personal and the political together in their own lives. They had personally struggled with poverty and oppression and they wanted to help make some changes in other people's lives.

Overall these women thought that growing up in a poor, working class family had been an asset to them as social workers. One of the participants speculated that:

If I had been born and raised in a middle class family I would have no understanding of that - when women come in and talk about not being able to feed their kids or the fact that they haven't eaten all day because they had to make sure that they've fed their kids in the morning and had something to give them at lunch time. I don't think I would have an understanding and believe that that's actually what's happened. Because I have heard other people say, that's ridiculous, like they're just starving themselves or whatever. But I don't believe that. I believe that's what they have to do.

Having lived in poverty and having seen their parents going without to feed and clothe the family these women have a great deal of empathy and a genuine understanding of the plight that poor, working class people endure despite having reflected very little on their own life journeys.

Another participant when asked how her working class background may have

helped her in her career as a social worker said:

it was better than any text book I've ever read; any lecture I've ever gotten from any professor... I believe I can relate on a level that other people (who haven't lived it) can't relate.

Social work is a profession that is based on humanitarian values, a desire to create social change and a direct relationship with people, many of whom are poor working class. The participants had lived in poverty, and experienced the oppression and the devaluing of their existence by their own families as well as others. They all felt that they could really relate to the adversity that their clients face. While this is not the only criterion for a good social worker, it was one that the participants in the study thought was invaluable to their practice.

### Role Models

A role model is someone you strive to be like; someone who makes an impact on you (Becvar & Becvar, 1988). All these women had significant role models in their lives. Three of the women considered their grand-mothers to be their role model. Their grandmothers were hard working, independent, strong women, as one woman expressed:

She (her grandmother) believed that you could be anything you wanted to be. I don't know why she believed that; cause I guess she was everything she wanted to be in her world, right. And she had really high self-esteem and she knew what she was good at. So she was definitely my best role model.

This quote shows how important other women were in their lives. Their role models were



able to pass on their lived experiences, and their sense of power, which had a huge impact on the participants in this study. For another participant it was a social advocate, a stranger, who came to her home when she was a teenager who had the most impact on her. This woman was petitioning government to keep the low income housing in their neighborhood:

I remember one lady coming by our house and asking if we would sign this petition...so that was the first person that really instilled a lot of questions and promoted hope that change was possible. I didn't realize the impact until now when I look back on it.

This quote illustrates the impact of seeing someone (another woman) who exhibited a different picture that represented change as a distinct possibility.

These women seemed to play a significant role in the participants' lives. A commonality among all the role models was that they exhibited a sense of personal power and they showed that they were entitled to take a place in their world.

### Summary

In summary, socio-economic class differences are more than having money; money is just one part of it. Privilege and power which weave together to keep the status quo operational also maintains the oppression of the poor working class. Bishop (1994) refers to class as having both cultural and political aspects, which need to be addressed. The participants in this study experienced the inequalities based on not being in positions of privilege and power. Their poor working class backgrounds acted as a huge barrier that they were able to overcome in part by acquiring specific skills. Now that they have moved beyond the barriers of their class, to some degree, they have gained the



strength and power that comes with being able to fit into both cultures: the working class and the middle class. Van Manen (1990) suggests one can only reflect on lived experience after the fact. Some of the participants, in the study, had not given any thought to how their class backgrounds have impacted their lives prior to this research.

## Chapter Five

### Conclusion

The purpose of this research was to conduct an exploratory, qualitative study on the experiences of women who grew up in the poor, working class and who are currently social workers. This research was done using a descriptive phenomenological methodology with a feminist epistemology. This approach allowed for the exploration and understanding of the lived experience of the participants in the study. Five women were interviewed in an attempt to explore their lived experiences.

The goal of the research was, first, to examine the impact of the working class experiences of women who have chosen social work as a career. In this elucidating of women's experience, I wanted to validate their experiences and give voice to it. Second, because of my own working class background, I wanted to open up a dialogue on the issues that face those of us who grew up in working class backgrounds and have had an opportunity for class mobility. Third, as a feminist and as a social worker I feel it is imperative that there is more of a focus on the impact of class inequality as it relates to social work and women's oppression. Isaac (1995) states that in social work "class becomes an invisible category and many people "pass" by disregarding or silencing discussion of class..." (p.12). In this research, I have attempted to make the class experience visible.

Overall, six significant themes emerged from the research. First, to be able to achieve class mobility all of the women in the study became excellent observers of how the middle and upper class behaved in society. Thus, middle class standards were the

'correct' ones that necessitated learning, often at the expense of their own heritage.

A second theme that appeared was that achieving social class mobility had a price. This price was a feeling of alienation from friends and family who did not move into the middle class by way of education, employment or both. Significant people in the participants' lives felt that they had been abandoned and as such no longer felt that they could relate to the women. The move into the middle class, while it had some benefits was not accomplished without loss of a sense of belonging.

Third, in keeping with the above point, the participants identified that they still did not feel comfortable in the middle class, despite their education and accomplishments. Four out of the five women still identified themselves as being working class at their core. They wore their middle class personas as needed rather than as an integral part of who they are. The combination of the second and third theme meant that these women felt a lack of 'fit' with either class.

The fourth theme that emerged was that despite their successes, the majority of these women still had the feeling of not deserving what they had attained. They still felt they were not as smart or as qualified as their middle class counterparts. This is significant because it shows how one does not leave behind one's upbringing despite the social benefits attained by crossing class borders.

A fifth theme was the feeling of having to work extraordinarily hard in order to achieve their goals because they did not have any outside financial support. The realization that they were totally responsible for their own achievements led to a fierce sense of independence in each of the women interviewed. This independence was not altogether chosen, but the only alternative if one did not wish to remain poor.

The sixth theme was related to the impact of other women who acted as role models in the participants' lives. All of the women interviewed had at least one other woman who displayed characteristics of hope, power and strength that were admired and imitated. For this reason it is of paramount importance that, as a social work educator, I can convey these qualities to the working class women with whom I work.

### Limitations of the Study

The limitations of the research will be fully realized through continued exploration and discussion of the data. According to Bergum (1991), these discussions must include friends, partners, colleagues, researchers, practitioners and scholars in order to better understand the importance of women's experiences of growing up in poor, working class environments.

Having only five participants may be viewed by some as a limitation of the research; however, the intent of the study is to ascertain the experiences of these women. I cannot assume that the data will be generalizable to all women who grew up in poor, working class environments and who chose social work as a career.

### The Personal Impact of the Research

The themes that were identified by the participants resonated with me as well. I, too have been a keen observer of behaviour and have felt that others were more intelligent or knew more than I did. When the themes emerged I was astounded at the new clarity I had about my own experiences. I had to check with friends who had a middle class experience to see if this in fact was not everyone's experience. I asked my middle class friends questions like: "How did you learn how to eat at a fancy restaurant? What did you call your evening meal?" I needed to check out my own experiences and

perceptions to see if they were because of my poor, working class background.

There were two themes that emerged that were not part of my experience as far as I am able to determine at this point. One was the value put on reading. In my family reading was our main source of entertainment. The other theme that did not resonate for me was the experience of role models. I did not have a significant woman in my life who acted as a role model.

Professionally, as an instructor at the college level, the data from this research allows me to be as cognizant of class-related issues as I am around race and gender related issues. I will build into future curriculum, class issues along with race and gender issues. I also intend to talk to social work colleagues about the importance of discussing and analyzing class. As Reinharz (1992) suggests, it is important to continue to raise consciousness in order to create social change.

### Suggestions for Future Research

This research was a first step in exploring class as it relates to social workers. Further research on the implications of growing up in poor working class backgrounds on social workers needs to be conducted. Insight from this research may contribute to as much dialogue about class issues as race and gender issues in undergraduate and graduate programs in social work.

Further research could also be done involving clients with regard to their perceptions of who the 'good' and 'bad' workers are as related to the workers' class background.

The results of this research could be used in the recruitment process when hiring social workers. The identification of class issues should be a core question in the recruit-

ment process, given that the majority of clients are from poor, working class backgrounds. If social workers are not aware of class oppression, this may result in some training needing to occur as part of their orientation to the job.

This research may also give some insight into why it is difficult to retain social workers in the north, especially, in child protection where there is a retention problem. If management has some awareness of class oppression, they may be able to give the support that is necessary to those workers who may be struggling with their own class issues.

This research may be beneficial to social workers who clearly recognize their own class issues as well as those of their clients. A dialogue about class oppression may help social workers practice more effectively when working with poor working class clients.

In conclusion, in an era of increased recognition of diversity and difference, it is incumbent on those who advocate for social justice to begin to integrate class and its manifestations and meanings into their work and lives.



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## **Appendix 1**

### **Consent to Participate and Release of Information Form**

## Appendix 1

### Consent to participate in Interview and Release of Information form

I \_\_\_\_\_, am prepared to participate in up to three two hour interviews on my working class background and how that may have influenced my decision to enter into the field of Social Work.

I agree to these interviews based on the following conditions:

1. The interviewer has my permission to tape record and/or take notes of the interview. At any time I am uncomfortable with answering a question I can have the tape recorder turned off and not answer the question. I can stop the interview or withdraw from the interviews at any time.

2. Lana Coldwell may use the information from the interviews in her thesis report, presentations, and publications. This may include the use of quotations from my interview for publications provided I am not named.

3. I will be given the transcripts to review and give any clarifications as necessary.

4. The interviewer will store the tapes and consent forms in a locked cabinet securely stored for two years.

5. While every attempt will be made to protect my identity some particulars may be familiar to someone who knows me.

Both parties have discussed the above conditions and have agreed to proceed with the interview.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of the Participant

Date \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of the Researcher

Date \_\_\_\_\_